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Review of *Truly Human Enhancement: A Philosophical Defense of Limits* by Agar, Nicholas

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In *Truly Human Enhancement: A Philosophical Defense of Limits*, Nicholas Agar contributes once more to the debate regarding the ethics of human enhancement, after his 2004 and 2010 books, *Liberal Eugenics* and *Humanity's End*. The main thesis of *Truly Human Enhancement* is that it is important to take into consideration the “significance of differences in degree of human enhancement... human enhancement is a good thing, but one that it’s possible to have too much of it”. The author endorses moderate enhancements, while rejecting radical enhancements. The focus of the book on the *degree* of enhancement—not merely the mean or the goal of enhancement—is the novelty here. This means that Agar embraces some technological progress to a degree, within some limits. He illustrates his position using the imagery found in the movie *Star Trek*, “Here, recognizable human beings use fabulous technologies to travel the universe. They view these technologies very different from the way they view their brains and bodies. The technologies that transport humans across the universe are radically improved. Human brains and bodies are recognizes as grounds of valuable experiences and are preserved”. For the purpose of this review, I will briefly comment on the notion of radical enhancement and then focus on the idea introduced in this book that two ideals drive the enhancement enterprise.

First, Agar introduces the concept of radical enhancement, which he defines as “the improvement of significant attributes and abilities to levels that *greatly exceed* what is currently possible for human beings”. Agar argues against it, in favor of moderate enhancement. It seems, however, that accepting moderate enhancements, while rejecting radical enhancements, is problematic, if not untenable. Indeed, if we were to accept moderate enhancements only, we might over time end up with some sort of radical enhancements, nonetheless. Putting it simply,

moderate enhancements + moderate enhancements + time = radical enhancement. In this context, it might therefore be better to speak against enhancement that would transform *Homo sapiens* into another species, while having some flexibility in defining *Homo sapiens* over time, not as a fixed entity, for example.

Second, Agar distinguishes between two ideals that drive human enhancement: the anthropocentric ideal and the objective ideal. “The anthropocentric ideal assigns value to enhancements relative to human standards”, while “[a]ccording to the objective ideal, human enhancements have value commensurate with the degree to which they objectively enhance our capacities”. On the one hand, human enhancement is about making better *humans* (holistically speaking). On the other hand, it is about enhancing particular *traits*, such as intelligence, memory, cognition, or health, without any regards to human standards for its moral evaluation.

Agar does “not intend to reject the objective ideal in favor of some version of the anthropocentric ideal”. However, he acknowledges that the two ideals are in conflict with one another. So, why doesn’t Agar explicitly endorse an anthropocentric ideal approach? How can he be against radical enhancement, yet refusing to reject the objective ideal? One also wonders whether the objective ideal is really a legitimate way to evaluate human enhancement. When we speak of human enhancement, can we really say that a given traits (such as intelligence or memory) is better, without referring to an anthropocentric ideal? Moreover, it seems that the objective ideal would fall back into an anthropocentric ideal, or another subjective ideal (the ideal of a given subject), because an object is unable to make a moral evaluation. When we speak of enhancing intelligence, we will eventually have to refer to a given subject, in order to evaluate whether intelligence has indeed enhanced the subject or not. One could add here new type of ideals, such as the posthuman ideal, the transhuman ideal or different ideals for different animals. Those subjective ideals will then be use as a standard to evaluate whether the increasing of intelligence is to be seen as morally positive or not. This would avoid the problems found with the objective ideal. However, conflicts between different ideals driving enhancement would remain. One will have to choose whether to pursue (or not) enhancement according to which ideal they wish to strive towards.

Nonetheless, we can reject the objective ideal as an insufficient ideal that does not take into consideration the well-being of human (or a subject) as a whole, but only focus on the betterment of specific capacities (object) and could lead to some dis-enhancement. In other words, too much memory could be detrimental to humans, as Agar would agree. So it seems rather inconsistent that Agar does not explicitly reject the objective ideal approach, because this ideal encourages, after all, radical enhancements, which is exactly the type of enhancement he also rejects.

Despite this criticism, I find Agar’s position one of the most convincing in the debate, navigating between the bioconservatives, who reject all enhancements, and transhumanists, who rely on an objective ideal. Moreover, Agar is right: there are different degrees of enhancements. However, looking at different ideals driving enhancement might be more important than looking at the degrees of enhancement, because a given ideal will determine the mean, the goal and also the degree of enhancement. Whether we strive towards an anthropocentric or a posthuman ideal, our view of the goal, mean, and degree of a given enhancement will be radically different. Ideals become then central in this debate, as I have shown elsewhere. Whether humans should seek to enhance themselves according to another ideal than an anthropocentric ideal, such as a posthuman ideal, become then central in this debate and will need further investigation.